

Collaboration before collaborative research: The development of ‘Distant Voices’

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Abstract

In this article, we explore the origins and early development of the ongoing collaborative action research project ‘Distant Voices – Coming Home’. We begin by explaining why and how our somewhat different backgrounds and interests came to be connected in Distant Voices. We then go on to explore the project’s first two development stages. In discussing the first phase (Distant Voices 1), we focus on how and why we developed creative processes and practices as modes of communication, knowledge exchange and public engagement. In discussing the second phase (Distant Voices 2), we reflect upon how and why these practices came to be seen as constitutive of sites of personal and community development and of knowledge generation. In conclusion, we reflect briefly on the challenges of formalising Distant Voices in its current form – as a large-scale, collaborative research project.

Keywords

Criminal justice, community development, action research, methodology, reintegration, reentry, collaborative research

Introduction

In this article, we explore the origins and early development of the ongoing collaborative action research (CAR) project ‘Distant Voices – Coming Home’. Distant Voices aims to blur the boundaries between creative practice, research and knowledge exchange, mainly by using song-writing and song-sharing as contexts within which to explore challenges, possibilities and processes of re/integration after punishment, and to develop re/integrative practices and communities.

However, the current 3-year Economic and Social Research Council/Arts and Humanities Research Council (ESRC/AHRC) funded research project (2017–2020)¹ is in fact the third phase of a longer term collaboration established by the authors. Although, at the time of writing, we remain very much in the throes of this third phase, we want to ensure that the story of and learning from the earlier development stages are captured here – not least because we cannot properly make sense of the current project’s successes and struggles without understanding its genesis. We suspect that there are important lessons to be learned – for us and others – from excavating the informal, emergent collaboration that often precedes a formalised and institutionalised CAR project.

That seems a necessary precursor to thinking about (perhaps in a follow-up paper) what is gained and lost in the developmental transition from an emergent process to a multi-partner research project. As such, this is not an article about CAR itself, but rather an article about the journey from emergent knowledge exchange collaboration *towards* CAR.

To that end, we begin by explaining why and how our somewhat different backgrounds and interests came to be connected in Distant Voices. We then go on to explore the project’s first two development stages. In discussing the first phase (Distant Voices 1), we focus on how and why we developed creative processes and practices as modes of communication, knowledge exchange and public engagement. In discussing the second (Distant Voices 2), we

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reflect upon how and why these practices came to be seen as constitutive of sites of personal and community development and of knowledge generation. In the conclusion, we reflect briefly on the challenges of formalising Distant Voices as a large-scale, collaborative research project.

Why create an arts-based approach to re/integration?

Fergus McNeill

Criminologically at least, the origins of Distant Voices lie squarely in a predecessor project entitled 'The Desistance Knowledge Exchange (DesKE)'. Between 2011 and 2012, that collaborative project (with Steve Farrall, Claire Lightowler, Shadd Maruna and many others) sought to find new ways to use desistance research (about how and why people stop offending, see for example Farrall, 2000; Maruna, 2001) to inform criminal justice reform (see McNeill, 2006; McNeill and Weaver, 2010).

Rather than disseminating prescriptions for policy and practice based on our research, DesKE was conceived as a knowledge *exchange* process which involved a blog, a specially commissioned and produced documentary film ('The Road from Crime') and a series of 'Appreciative Inquiry' workshops in Belfast, Glasgow, London and Sheffield. We brought together academics, policymakers, practitioners, people with lived experience of criminal justice and their families to discuss and develop ideas for supporting desistance and for reforming criminal justice.

Through these processes, we eventually produced a set of 'Provocative Propositions' (Farrall et al., 2012), one of which focused on the acute challenges of social marginalisation and exclusion experienced by those labelled as 'offenders'; like other outsiders, they often suffer profound stigmatisation and rejection, compounding the effects of the material forms of inequality to which they are also disproportionately exposed (Kirkwood and McNeill, 2015; cf. Western, 2018). The relevant proposition therefore argued the need to,

9: Educate the general public about processes of desistance

The public needs more accurate information about the lives of those in the criminal justice system and in particular on the process of leaving crime behind.

Better public education could help to break down the 'them' and 'us' mentality around offending. If individuals in the criminal justice system were more humanised than demonised in the public imagination, members of the public would be more likely to believe that prisoners and probationers are capable of change, and that we all have a part to play in supporting change . . . (Farrall et al., 2012: 8)

The proposition suggested the crucial importance of finding ways to alter not the returning citizen (through conventional

approaches to 'personal' or 'psychological rehabilitation' (McNeill, 2012: 14)) but rather the *social reception* of those returning – and yet, there seemed to be little in the way of guidance about precisely how this radically different kind of practice might be best developed. The DesKE participants considered employing traditional and social media, and noted the importance of involving schools, but offered few other practical suggestions.

However, one important clue came from one of my DesKE collaborators, Shadd Maruna, and specifically from his research with Anna King on public attitudes to punishment and reintegration. Maruna and King (2008) argued that efforts to reform punishment and reintegration must take account of the emotive and visceral aspects of our responses to crime. They must, therefore, find ways to engage with these aspects directly and constructively, rather than trying to counteract or silence them with appeals to rational self or public interest. Maruna and King (2008) suggested the importance of attending to common cultural tropes around redemption (see also Maruna and King, 2009). But, for us, the more important clue here was to be found in recognition of the importance of forms of representation and communication that engaged us *affectively* as well as *cognitively*.

Alison Urie

My pathway into Distant Voices also begins with a predecessor project. Hot Chocolate Trust is a creative youth community organisation in Dundee's city centre. It is a place where people make and eat food together, make music and films together and re-imagine the city together. It is also a place where young people show up with their life in a bin bag, emerge from the toilet with two lines on a pregnancy test kit, run for refuge when they realise that they have got in over their head in a cannabis farm, and show up en-masse when their friend dies through suicide. This messy youth community also taught me much of what I know about systemic social injustice and developed skills that I did not know I had, in building community and translating across cultures. For me, it enabled a kind of reflective and adaptive practice that is based on prioritising *living with* rather than *doing for*.

Somehow though, despite initiating and leading Hot Chocolate Trust for 10 years from 2001, I had given little serious thought to the criminal justice system during that time. I did gain some experience of very good and very bad community policing. I also worked to support young people who were involved in community justice or were undertaking short prison sentences and/or who had experienced a family member's imprisonment. But, unlike my lay citizen's interest in how the education or health systems work, I had never really considered how our society deals with crime, administers punishment or supports reintegration.

Having decided to leave Hot Chocolate Trust in 2011, I gained further management experience in a larger charity where I found myself overseeing a small choir project with

'young offenders' in Cornton Vale, then Scotland's only women's prison and young offenders' institution. The austere buildings and institutionalising culture felt at odds with the building blocks of hospitality, respect and attention to 'places of belonging' that had underpinned my youth work experience. Yet, the young women at Cornton Vale seemed very similar to the young people I knew in Hot Chocolate Trust.

Around this time, Fergus and I met when we both joined the Board of a small neighbourhood youth project in the north of Glasgow. I began to ask about his work in criminology and social work. I remember sending him a text 1 day to ask, 'This [criminal] justice thing. Is it really unjust?' We began having conversations about our shared interests, wondering if my experience in community development through creative processes might be synergistic with Fergus' academic and practical work on desistance and reintegration.

Fergus invited me to take part in the Glasgow-based DesKE workshops, which brought these emerging conversations and ideas into sharp focus. It seemed increasingly clear to both of us (and to the other DesKE participants, as Fergus has noted earlier) that changing the social reception of people 'coming home' after punishment required an opening up of public conversations on crime and punishment – beyond those who were already personally and professionally knowledgeable on the subject.

Reflecting on Maruna and King's (2008) work, Fergus and I explored what forms of communication took *us* beyond rationality, facts and debate into more affective engagement with other people's lives and concerns and, in so doing, we realised a shared love of music and song. Thus, we started to imagine whether and how song – as a form of cultural communication (Carless and Douglas, 2011) – might inform richer dialogue on crime and punishment.

These initial conversations reached a turning point early in 2013 when we met with some friends and colleagues with expertise in knowledge exchange and service design from the Institute for Research and Innovation in Social Services² (now known simply as Iriss). By the end of our conversation, these colleagues had asked what resources would be required to set up the third sector organisation that we were starting to imagine might run these activities (later named Vox Liminis [trans. Voices from the Threshold] and formally established in summer 2013). They phoned me the following Tuesday, having secured both a small amount of funding and a temporary base from which I could operate. These resources, combined with encouragement and licence to experiment with turning the ideas into practice, provided the perfect seedbed for the venture.

Distant Voices, and with it Vox Liminis, therefore, began as a two-person collaboration between a community development practitioner and social entrepreneur on the one hand, and a criminologist on the other hand, but with the support of a knowledge exchange organisation committed to research and innovation providing the support and modest resources that created the 'tipping point' between aspiration and action.

Distant Voices I: Knowledge exchange and engagement

By autumn 2013, we had secured a small amount of Knowledge Exchange funding from the University of Glasgow to develop Distant Voices as a partnership between the Scottish Centre for Crime and Justice Research and the now-fledgling charity, Vox Liminis. The application for funding also named Iriss as a collaborator (recognising its support for Vox) and another charity that Fergus had helped to establish a year or two before: 'Positive Prison? Positive Futures . . .' (PPPF) – an organisation of and for people with convictions which aimed both to provide mutual support and to work for wider criminal justice reform. The plans were ambitious. Distant Voices would involve a series of workshops in which PPPF members' lived experience of the criminal justice system would engage with the knowledge of criminologists and the skills and sensibilities of artists to co-design a large public performance (probably of songs) to 'seek to narrow the social distance between "the punished" and the community on whose behalf they are punished, thus challenging and changing attitudes on both sides of the divide that prison creates'.

The first workshop was held in a run-down community hall where we self-catered, creating a 'make-do-and-mend' ambience which seemed to help the diverse participants feel equally at ease/ill-at-ease. The morning was focused on getting to know one another and on exploring our provisional plans. We invited a social marketing expert to lead the afternoon, through a connection at Iriss. He asked us 'what is your message' and 'what do you want people to do?'. Although this social change-focused approach generated plenty of discussion and a fair amount of passion, not least from those with lived experience, it left some of us feeling uncomfortable, but not quite able to articulate why. After some reflection, we realised that the social marketing approach presumed too much; it suggested we somehow knew what was right or what should be done, and that we just needed to find a way to get our message across. But we were not (yet) a collective or a collaboration with a specific political agenda or a 'message'; rather, we were a hastily assembled group of some people with different experiences and common interests that wanted to create space to collaboratively explore our knowledge(s) and experiences.

In a second workshop, therefore, we took a different tack, bringing in a friend skilled in using mediation as an approach to conflict resolution, Charlie Irvine. He provided an input on some of the research and ideas that underpin mediation; for example, encouraging us to consider the attribution biases that we use to defend ourselves from blame (and to blame others), and to practice-perspective taking as a way of moderating these biases; essentially, exploring how people differently situated in relation to personal and social conflict might see these conflicts quite differently. These kinds of ideas felt like a much better fit with our aspiration to explore and

exchange diverse forms of knowledge. They also resonated with restorative practices sometimes used within or as an alternative to criminal justice (see Chapman, 2020).

The second part of that workshop involved an initial experiment with creative practices; specifically, we asked three musicians to lead us in a short group songwriting exercise. The three groups were organised so that each included people with personal, professional and academic experience, and we (very quickly) wrote songs together. The creative process was much too hurried, but the method threw somewhat unlikely people together into a co-creative process that everyone seemed to enjoy and find stimulating.

At the same time as these workshops were taking place, Vox Liminis was developing other strands of creative work within prisons. A series of four (2- or 3-day) songwriting projects called Vox Sessions began, the first of which was commissioned directly by a willing prison governor with others then funded through an Investing in Ideas Big Lottery grant. Vox Liminis recruited an intern (Kim Long) to work with Alison and also trained a number of freelance musicians to work in the prison context, and groups of prisoners were supported by singer-songwriters to write individual and group songs.

Drawing together insights, learning and people from the Distant Voices workshops and the Vox sessions, we planned a day of public events in June 2014 in The Briggait, Glasgow; an afternoon of 'Conversation Through Song' and an evening gig.

Conversation through song

In continuing discussion with Charlie Irvine drawing on his mediation expertise, we settled on a plan to commission five of the songwriters involved in the Distant Voices conversations and/or Vox Sessions to each write one song linked to a fictionalised but realistic crime and punishment scenario.

The five songwriters were assigned a character from the scenario (the person who committed the offence (at 3 different stages in the scenario – the time of his offence, shortly after imprisonment, and after release), his 10-year-old son and the victim) and asked to write from the perspective of the person involved. Each musician was paired with someone with either personal or professional experience in each of the areas, ensuring knowledge exchange in the process. For example, the musician writing from the victim's perspective was paired with a colleague in Victim Support Scotland.

Drawing from the use of deliberative processes in criminological research on public attitudes to punishment (although we would now recognise them as 'dialogical' rather than 'deliberative' (Escobar, 2011)), a workshop was devised where participants first heard a fictionalised newspaper report on the crime written by a journalist, and then listened to a performance of each song in turn. After each song, the audience was asked to respond to the following three questions on post-it notes:

1. Sum up your reaction to the song in one or two words.
2. If you could ask the person in the song one question what would it be?
3. What do you want to happen to or for the person?

The afternoon was concluded by a short summary of the responses and issues raised, and the audience was signposted to agencies present for support or information.

A diverse group of 60 invited participants took part in the afternoon (with some interested parties turned away due to capacity), including those engaged in the two preparatory workshops, a group from Victim Support Scotland, senior school pupils who were studying Modern Studies (which combines politics, sociology and social policy), a number of practitioners from disciplines related to criminal justice, people from two community groups located in high crime areas and people from a community choir.

The process of having participants respond personally to each unfolding part of the story, and being able to ask questions about it, allowed the diversity of opinions and reactions to be explored and collated. Group conversations were encouraged around tables after each song, but these worked better in some cases than others. Some people commented on feeling exposed in their group, as there had not been enough time to get to know each other before we launched into the process.

Some participants felt that the process was perhaps too one-sided – for example, we might have gone into the effect on the victim's family in more detail. One of our major concerns was that we had stirred up a lot of emotions that participants had no way to resolve or turn into action. Our discomfort with the notion of social marketing was perhaps the reason why we did not ask participants for any particular response at the end of the event. But, if repeating this process, we determined that it would be important to create space for people to better reflect on what they have experienced.

Our colleague Jo Collinson Scott (an academic musicologist and a singer-songwriter) raised questions about whether songwriters performing songs based on other people's experiences might be problematic. We had projected the words of the songs onto a screen during the performance. Although many participants appreciated this, Jo wondered if it might have underlined the importance of words rather than music in the songs. Discussions with Jo, and the existing reservations about social marketing mentioned earlier, also caused us to reflect further on the risks of instrumentalising art and, by implication, on the line at which commissioned art might become propaganda.

For some, the workshop experience evoked a degree of frustration – some were annoyed by what they saw as the self-absorption of fictional 'offender'. For most though, there were high levels of empathy with all characters and perspectives in the story. One person, who has no personal or professional expertise in the area commented at the end, 'I'm so frustrated! Every single person is a victim, and I feel so

powerless to change that'. Some participants who had not previously thought too hard about criminal justice immediately started trying to find ways that they might themselves play a role in changing things. For example, one man who runs a business got in touch with a member of PPPF to ask if he might be interested in labouring work. One young woman started to reconsider her future, exploring the possibility of a career change into criminal justice social work.

'Conversation through Song' was a highly affecting experience and, with hindsight, we should have better prepared participants in advance for what they might expect. The song written from the perspective of the 10-year-old boy separated from his father by imprisonment, and somehow blaming himself, was particularly difficult to hear. For almost all though, the experience was profoundly challenging, interesting and inspiring, and it is still discussed years later.

Evening gig

With an audience of approximately 160, including fans of the musicians, people with an interest in criminal justice and people with personal experience of imprisonment, the evening event was much more than either we or the audience expected. Realising that they would necessarily be gathered together for the day, we had simply asked the musicians involved in the afternoon event to prepare a short set that included the commissioned song and songs from Vox Sessions, along with any of their own work that they felt relevant.

The music was of high quality, with the performers' and audiences' shared passion for justice uniting the musicians in a way that created a unique experience. Making a space where the often distant voices of those within the justice system could be heard was powerful; human stories of love and loss, hope and fear, regret and pride seemed to underline our shared humanity, shared connections, without those connections needing to be named. The informal forum of the gig felt different to the structured conversation of the afternoon. Both performers and audience seemed more free to explore and construct their own meanings, liberated from all the effort expended in developing the afternoon's more considered but perhaps more contrived process.

Some unexpected people came to the evening event, generating ideas and insights about how Distant Voices (and Vox Liminis more generally) might develop. One audience member had been in touch before the event to ask what she might expect; her son was in prison and she wanted to prepare herself well. Unbeknown to her (and with the connection unknown to us), her son had that week written a beautiful love song in a prison-based Vox Session. When that song was performed, she was quite overwhelmed by the experience, and by the validity it gave to her son's voice.³ One young man came along to celebrate the first anniversary of his liberation date. He met a representative of Families Outside, an organisation that supports and campaigns for those affected by familial imprisonment, and

they had a long discussion on the effect his imprisonment still had on his family. Another man in the audience was home on leave from the Open (prison) Estate. He had recently taken part in a Vox Session, and brought two of his family to see what he had been involved in.

None of these were outcomes we were seeking in a knowledge exchange event designed to enhance public deliberation about crime and punishment. But the possibilities they unlocked in our thinking about integrating creative and community-building practices within criminal justice and public engagement were exciting. With respect to our aims for the events, we gathered evidence that suggested the process was successful in enabling people to connect emotionally and cognitively with issues pertinent to post-punishment reintegration. The intended humanising effect of the process was well-demonstrated. For example, we passed around a comment book, in which one audience member wrote, 'thought provoking event – made me reconsider my own prejudices'.

We did not anticipate that some participants in the process and audience members would be motivated by the events to themselves become more engaged in public conversations around penal reform. Some of the musicians went on to incorporate songs and stories from the project into their own set lists for mainstream gigs. As we have noted earlier, some audience members explored practical ways to respond to the issues raised. We have also received feedback from practitioners in other fields – police, clinical psychologists, community workers and doctors – that Distant Voices has affected the way they think about the people they work with on a day-to-day basis. Summing up, one comment from an audience member seemed to ring true for many: 'Thank you for taking us to places we've not been before and considering things unthought of before'.

Importantly, although these events were designed and run *not* as a research process but as knowledge exchange, we had collected sufficient evidence to be confident that, as we had hoped, the approach had succeeded in its aim to 'narrow the social distance between "the punished" and the community on whose behalf they are punished'. And though we did not have compelling evidence about 'challenging and changing attitudes on both sides of the divide that prison creates', we had some intriguing examples of the creative encounters in Distant Voices 1 provoking not just thought but also action.

In describing this first phase of Distant Voices, we (as authors) have used 'we' repeatedly, but without specifying who 'we' were or, more specifically, who was involved in the collaboration and in what way. Although the project was developing collaboratively with the people, groups and organisations discussed earlier, the reality was that the 'we' leading and facilitating Distant Voices 1 was not a 'community of enquiry' or a collective moved to act by a shared sense of injustice (as some versions of Participatory Action Research might envisage or require (see McIntyre, 2008)), but rather a pair of like-minded practitioners of different disciplines who had begun to explore a specific problem

together. We had defined the ‘problem’ and the initial vision of how to explore and address it was ours (albeit that both aspects were informed by the communities and collectives from which we came, in DesKE and in Hot Chocolate). We became ‘hosts’ of the process through which that vision was realised. While we actively invited others to join us in developing both the vision and the process, which shaped and changed both the process and the content, ultimately we were leading both.

Distant Voices 2: Knowledge generation, personal and community development

Having experienced, in the first phase, something of the potential of public engagement through creative and cultural processes, in phase 2, we brought the Vox Session model more fully into play. Much of the work took place in HMP Castle Huntly, Scotland’s only open prison, where many long-term prisoners prepare for release, and where reintegration issues and concerns are particularly close to the surface.

We designed a process to explore reintegration by bringing together, in a series of Vox Sessions, serving prisoners, families affected by imprisonment, people who have been released from prison, prison staff and other practitioners. We hoped that collaboration within the Sessions would bring together differing and unique experiences and knowledge in a creative exchange mediated through songwriting. We also planned to significantly increase the public reach of the project, hoping to attract radio coverage for the songs produced and to attract larger audiences to gigs.

Reflecting back on this stage of the project, we had slightly differing emphasis in how we articulated the vision. For example, in the funding proposal submitted to the University for this second phase of the work, Fergus continued to foreground the project’s ‘potential to mobilise people as “citizen-advocates” for research-informed penal reform’, hoping that the energy and incipient activism generated in the events discussed in the preceding section might be better channelled. However, that phrasing around ‘research-informed penal reform’ perhaps betrays a certain pragmatism in seeking to appeal to ‘impact’-preoccupied university budget-holders. By contrast, Alison titled the project ‘Reintegration – Creative Co-production’, emphasising her belief that the work of reintegration lay in the process of creative co-production rather than being a product of it.

We approached the Scottish Prison Service, who agreed to match-fund the project, alongside an ESRC ‘Impact Acceleration Award’ grant from the University of Glasgow. Neither PPPF nor Iriss were involved as formal partners at this stage in the project, although both retained an interest. This phase was again, essentially a collaboration between us (Fergus and Alison), but now accompanied by a growing

team of people who had engaged in the project to date in one way or another. The Vox Liminis team continued to grow, first with Graeme McKerracher whose community development background further shaped and developed the work, followed by additional staff and an increasing number of freelance artists. The collaborative aspect of the project was designed into the process of creative activity; it lay in collaborative songwriting, creative community-building and performance. A collective of sorts was beginning to form, particularly through the initiation of a weekly gathering (‘Vox Unbound’) on Tuesday nights to make and share food and then to make and share songs.

However, even in planning this second stage of the project, we started to look forward towards a third stage of Distant Voices that would involve a large-scale research project; in the Impact Acceleration Award grant application, we wrote about our aim to secure funding for a project that ‘explores the connections between research, knowledge exchange, creative processes, communities of practice and public engagement’.

Creative co-production – a case study of a Vox Session

Our plan to host Vox Sessions with diverse participants was at times complicated, and at other times exhilarating. The most ambitious of these projects – which aimed to work with prisoners in the Open Estate together with their family members – was ultimately unsuccessful. The prison worked to make it possible, but the family members either got cold feet or had to prioritise other commitments. But even in this situation quite radical moments occurred. The prison officer assigned to the project decided that if the prisoners were being asked to bring in their family members, then he should too. He and his son took part in the Session, and both spoke of the positive effect it had on their relationship at a time of transition. Both have stayed involved with the project in the years since.

One seminal project during this phase took place in June 2015 at HMP Castle Huntly. This Vox Session brought together nine serving prisoners, one prison officer, two former prisoners, Fergus and three criminology post-graduate researchers, four freelance musicians and two Vox Liminis staff members. The 3-day project involved 21 people in total and produced no less than 30 songs loosely themed around ‘reentry’.

Despite his role in the origins of Distant Voices, this was the first time that Fergus had taken part in a Vox Session. He reflected later that this was a turning point in his thinking about the process of collaborative songwriting itself as a process of integration. It also cemented a shift in his thinking about Distant Voices, moving from a focus on knowledge exchange to research. When asked to reflect on his first two Vox Sessions, Fergus commented,

The quality of connections and conversations that took place around the making of stuff together was different and more revealing than the thin kind of conversation that you get when you walk into a room and introduce yourself [as a researcher] and start asking questions . . . [The co-writing process was] personal to me, and personal to people around me. Sharing together, it was dialogical. And I was coming out of it richly aware of their experiences and some of mine – and the relationships between them.

One of the criminology post-graduates at the Castle Huntly session, Kirsty Deacon (2015), undertook a study of this session as part of a Masters project based on interviews with the participants and on her own participant observation within it. In her dissertation, she wrote about one prisoner, nearing release, who wrote a song about trying to move on from his past, with a challenging refrain: 'I've changed but they won't let me, oh I've changed'. When asked about the project, he said,

I think that's brilliant, know what I mean, cos then it'll gie folk, let them know that we're still, even though we're in prison, we've still got feelings, we're still normal.

The prison officer in the group spoke to Kirsty about mutual understandings forged within the session:

It then lets you see a different side and they probably see a different side of me as well . . . I think something like this shows you that when we actually all put it down together and write about our experiences, my experiences personally and emotionally are no different to what the guys have been writing about.

When we started working in HMP Castle Huntly, we were warned by staff in the prison that they often struggled to get men to engage in voluntary activity. Through the Vox Sessions, we have seen men surprise themselves and staff not only by engaging in activities but also by then sustaining and developing connections forged in Sessions outside them – both within the prison (e.g. initiating a peer-led guitar group) and on release from prison (becoming active within the wider Vox community and in other organisations). Equally, as well as getting involved in the Sessions, some prison staff members have been greatly encouraging of the prisoners' efforts, celebrating with them when their work has been recognised publicly (e.g. through radio play, gigs and in newspaper articles). In the words of the prison's then Head of Offender Outcomes:

With Vox Liminis we have seen a noticeable cultural shift amongst the prisoner population; engagement with staff and as a consequence all activities have increased, specifically education. We note offenders have built on this with community supports, and have capitalised and consolidated on their home leave (attending evening meetings on their own cognisance). Also, anecdotal reports from families to staff of offenders having positive changes, and a shift to more positive/different peers.

While we might struggle with some of the language in the above quote, it articulates an observation of relational and cultural change that goes beyond the sometimes shallow reading of engagement with the arts solely as education.

Criminal justice sector and small public events

During this phase of the project, the developing partnerships generated invitations to run smaller gigs, workshops and lectures. Performing songs, sharing emerging thoughts and hosting conversations, for example, at events such as a Scottish Government Community Justice Division team day, the annual Scottish Prison Service conference and the cultural and political space created by the Imagination Festival, all helped clarify our understanding of how different audiences interacted with the work, thus shaping our practice. Each of these events was designed, as much as possible, to bring audiences into active conversation with the songs.

One particular event stands out as important in shaping our emerging understandings of our work. The Scottish Association for the Study of Offending invited us to perform at their annual conference's pre-dinner reception. The event was held in a high-class hotel and involved senior figures within the justice sector, including members of the judiciary. Our set-list included 'Pixelated Pictures', a song that had been written by a group of imprisoned women, young offenders and songwriters in a Vox Session a few months before. While we were sound-checking, the then Chief Inspector of Prisons (who had been supportive of the work as it evolved) said that he had been listening to the recently released 'Distant Voices: Silent Seconds' EP (more of which below) and singing along in his car. We half-jokingly asked if he would like to join us on stage to sing backing vocals. He said he would do it if we also joined in.

The result was that the senior justice figures gathered in an upmarket hotel heard the insightful and challenging words and music of a group of imprisoned women only 4 miles away, voiced by musicians, a criminologist, the Director of Vox and the Chief Inspector of Prisons. The subversiveness of this performance was not lost on some of the audience. A CEO of a large charity later commented,

To my knowledge that conference is the only one the judiciary attend with other professions due to their priority to preserve their independence. Nonetheless, everyone very much remains in their roles/silos. What that Vox performance did in my view was, in an entirely non-threatening way, cut through all that and generate a common shared connection and identity. I cannot imagine any other process achieving that.

The Distant Voices festival

We marked the end of this second phase of Distant Voices in November 2015 by launching the EP referred to earlier: 'Silent Seconds'. This was not a planned part of the project, but realising that we had some underspend, we commissioned Louis

Abbott, a freelance artist already active in the project, to select songs and coordinate their studio recording and production. Louis was given a high degree of creative freedom in the process, checking in with us at key decision points.

While this was a significant addition to the project, it had its limitations. Reflecting later on this process, we recognised that, while the end-product seemed to us an undeniably beautiful set of songs, our approach had not continued to prioritise the creative collaboration that had been so important in the songwriting. The prison-based songwriters were not involved in the development and recording of their songs, although we had, of course secured their consent at the outset and did try to ensure that they were kept informed. We sent them copies of the EP and we invited them (where possible) to the launch event.

Similarly, in the recording process, we chose to have the musicians that we most wanted to *perform* a given song take the lead in the vocal recording, meaning that some musician co-writers were not involved. Recognising the limitations to participation in the EP's development and production, which arose from it being a late addition to the original plan, we determined to ask how we might make song collaborations in the next stage of the project more meaningfully collaborative all the way through from inception to release. That said, as we have learned subsequently, it is often complex and time consuming to find and sustain contact with co-writers, particularly those who had been imprisoned and then released.

The Silent Seconds EP launch was part of a four-event Distant Voices festival that we organised at Glasgow's Centre for Contemporary Arts. It felt important to us that the work was shared in an arts venue and was listed within their programme. This supported some promotion of the work and ensured appropriate sound and lighting to enable the quality of the performance. It also helped secure newspaper reviews of the events. However, it came with the inevitable restrictions of reduced flexibility, a more bland-feeling space, and a rather grumpy sound engineer – all of which affected the mood of the evening. The venue was geographically easy to access, but we had not anticipated the physical and psychological barriers that it seemed to create, in respect to culture and class. It positioned the event well and truly in an arts space but simultaneously located it within a primarily middle- and upper-class cultural environment.

The gig itself was remarkable. We observed the pride and joy on the faces of several song co-writers (particularly, some prisoners and a prison officer) who were in the audience when their song was shared. Seeing Gordon, the former prisoner who had co-written 'Breathe Life' in a prison session – this time able to attend with his partner and his mother to hear his song performed – felt particularly poignant.

We had planned a more detailed evaluation process for the gig this time, asking people to reflect on the experience on a blank mock CD sleeve rather than in a comment book. But despite a more thought-through plan, we received relatively little feedback. Perhaps this event just felt more like a typical

gig, a context where people were less likely to respond, however we presented the forms. We also invited responses and reflections from audience members after the event.

One commented,

I have to admit, at first the breadth of songs surprised me, as I suppose I was expecting something more like the [Distant Voices 1] EP with the songs very much reflecting the experiences around imprisonment. However, once I thought about it, I can see that it is good for prisoners to not be defined by the stories around their imprisonment and so telling other stories of place, or loss gave an opportunity to give a much broader view of themselves and the things that are important to them.

Another wrote,

Unique experience – something I'd have probably never had considered going to before. It's made me think quite differently about prisons and offenders. I'm still thinking about this.

One funder of Vox Liminis noted that they were surprised to not see prisoners performing their songs, and that this would have made it better. This raises some of the complex tensions we continue to face. Is it authentic for predominantly middle-class performers to voice songs that largely draw on the life experience of people who often have very different backgrounds and life experiences? Conversely, is it ethical to make a platform for people in the criminal justice system rather than because their performance is of a standard that deserves that particular stage? Which is more respectful and authentic? In fact, the funder in question was unaware that, in fact, there *was* a former prisoner on stage that night who had written songs in prison. His musical ability was a match to the setting. And he was not introduced as a former prisoner but rather as a co-writer.

Considering the role of the performance, one audience member reflected that

The play of distance (not the artist's lyrics) and identification (more than just a cover) was moving and involving as we heard the artists use their power to let someone else's voice be heard and to make it sound as good/strong/beautiful/as they could.

Perhaps despite the limitations we had woven in to what collaboration meant in this process, the event served to bring people who may never meet into indirect, culturally mediated connection. One audience member, who works in the criminal justice system, reflected after the event:

It was beautiful. I'm still feeling a bit raw from it. It brings all sorts of pains up that people usually repress, certainly made me think about stuff I've bottled up and not thought about for years. There's something about experiencing other people being so open that is contagious, I get the sense that everyone involved – creators and observers – feels so liberated by it and gets a reminder of who they really are. Ironically it's all about

liberation, isn't it? And that's a little bit frightening. It also feels like it touches truth more closely than most of the stuff we all spend our time doing, but not just in a 'here's my truth' documented then way but in more in a here's my truth – let's change it kind of way. I'm not quite sure what to make of it all yet but I feel it strongly.

A second Masters student, Alejandro Rubio Arnal (2016a) conducted ethnographic research into the festival, exploring its impact on himself (through auto-ethnographic methods) and on a small number of other participants (through observations and interviews). He concluded that

Through encouraging the co-exploration of different views and meanings that people attach to the world (Escobar, 2011), engaging in music-mediated dialogue seems to counter stigma by opening up new 'knowledge' and reducing the emotional distance that is both a consequence of stigma and key to its maintenance. (Rubio Arnal, 2016b, unpaginated)

The second stage of the evolution of Distant Voices then convinced us of the importance and value of our approach, but it also changed the nature of the collaboration involved. While this phase no longer involved PPPF and Iriss as organisational partners, it involved a more developed engagement with the Scottish Prison Service, not just in the provision of significant match-funding, but also in more sustained relationships with particular prisons (particularly HMP Castle Huntly) and with key staff members within them. Perhaps more importantly, the community of people involved with Distant Voices and with Vox Liminis grew. Vox employed new staff and expanded the pool of freelance musicians involved in the work. Our regular Tuesday evening meetings allowed key relationships with people who had been involved in songwriting Sessions and other activities to be nurtured and sustained. Yet, when it came to the production of the *Silent Seconds* EP, the degree of co-writer participation in recording and production was notably limited.

While this stage certainly did not (yet) represent the creation of social movement (Maruna, 2017), it did represent the emergence of a creative community of interest, coalescing primarily around the practices of songwriting and sharing and around a common interest in criminal justice and its reform. That community was becoming the site and source of a wide range of creative collaborations. While rooted in the inter-personal process of co-writing songs, we were also beginning to notice institutional and systemic engagement and effects. Crucially, from a research perspective, we were beginning to learn that making things together (whether songs or food or events) was generating new knowledge and new insight; and that these co-creative practices changed the dynamic and quality of our engagements with one another and our learning together (McNeill, 2015). Without intending to, we had started to become a 'community of enquiry'. Vox Liminis was that community's curator, host and facilitator, with Alison and her gradually growing staff team

providing both the nurture and the structure required. But to realise our potential as co-enquirers would require other resources and skills.

Discussion: Enquiring together

The development of our proposal to the ESRC for grant funding for 'Distant Voices: Coming Home' required new collaborators with knowledge and skills complementary to our own. Jo Collinson Scott (aka 'Jo Mango') brought her expertise as a musicologist, musician, song-writer and in practice-as-research, and Oliver Escobar brought his expertise in participatory, deliberative democracy and in CAR. Together, we more consciously designed a new stage in and form of collaboration, in which we would work with and through a 'core group' of the developing community of enquiry to distil the learning about reintegration that was emerging from our practices and processes of co-creating songs in Sessions and sharing them in a variety of ways and with a variety of audiences. Once the funding was awarded, we employed Phil Crockett Thomas, a visual sociologist (and creative practitioner) to join us as the project's full-time research associate. Shortly afterwards, Lucy Cathcart Frödén commenced a related and ongoing PhD project.

Although it remains too soon for us to write much about the learning from the current phase of the project, there are numerous forms of output on our website (www.distant-voices.org.uk) – blogposts, songs, podcasts and so on – that both represent and reflect upon that learning. In a recently published paper, Urie et al. (2019) provide a more detailed account of the research design and method, and reflect on some of the learning to date.

The detailed narrative contained in this article charts our collaboration and learning prior to embarking on a formal research project. The two phases reported here were marked by a high degree of experimentation and a fast pace of development, enabled by quick decision-making from a small number of people deeply involved in the day-to-day work, able to swiftly react to learning, opportunities and changes. The kind of 'agility' is perhaps more characteristic of a start-up organisation or an innovative design company than the slow, deliberate and disciplined development and management of a typical research project.

The informal, at times accidental, learning that we describe in this article was the result of multi-method knowledge exchange rather than collaborative 'research' as such. Its informality was and is central to its vitality and success. But, having recognised (during Distant Voices 2) the quality and importance of that learning, and having secured funding for the project as a formal research project (albeit one that insisted upon blurring the boundaries between creative practice, research and knowledge exchange), we were soon compelled to confront some of the challenges that the formalisation of the learning entailed.

As an ESRC-funded research project,⁴ it initially seemed straightforward and pragmatic to structure ‘Distant Voices: Coming Home’ leadership with an experienced academic Principal Investigator based in an academic institution. But the challenges of a leadership structure sitting outside of the day-to-day practice of a fast-moving and adaptive team in the host organisation led quickly to complications in hierarchy and leadership. Whatever Fergus’s personal and institutional commitments to doing creative, collaborative and innovative work, the receipt of the ESRC grant created new accountabilities, new partnership structures and complex questions of governance, power and authority. The primarily relational accountabilities – both between us as co-leaders and with other participants – that had been paramount in the first two phases, remained important. However, the responsibilities attached to managing public money within a multi-institution partnership meant that our established practices were superseded in ways that none of us had fully anticipated.

These institutionalising pressures also found themselves reflected in more basic necessities associated with writing an application for research funding. We needed to specify our ‘Research Team’ and its relationship to a notional ‘core group’ and, even though we tried to do this in the most collaborative ways we could imagine, even the distinction between the one and the other risked setting up an implicit hierarchy. Crucially, it is the research team and the institutions they represent that are ultimately accountable to the funder – and with that accountability comes challenges of power and control. Indeed, even the use of the term ‘research’ has sometimes created discomfort and a sense of alienation for some outside of the research team. In essence, a community of which they were part, and which they thought they understood, was being re-described and re-engineered in terms unfamiliar to them, but implicitly required (in traditional understandings of research projects) by re-inventing the project as a (new) research project. The failure to see and make *explicit* the nature of these transitions in accountability, power and control (whether anticipated or not), later became a source of some tension and conflict.

In one sense, these transitions – from the community to the academy – reflect fundamental questions about who ‘owns’ and controls research as knowledge production. In reflecting on their varied ‘criminological engagements’, Liebling et al. (2017) discuss the associated problem of ‘epistemic privilege’; referring to the sometimes subtle and sometimes not-so-subtle assumption (particularly implied by the contemporary ‘impact agenda’) that academic researchers and institutions somehow ‘know best’ and must therefore be the leaders of research processes and projects. They note that

Conventionally, academics tend to defend the value of research and scholarship in two ways; one related to method and one related to theory. In relation to methods, we argue that the

disciplined nature of our inquiry leads to the production of knowledge of special standing; knowledge that is qualitatively different from reflection on ‘lay’ experience, for example. In relation to theory, we argue that our ability to observe, analyse, and interpret the social worlds we study, and to synthesize scholarship or to refine arguments about them, is based on an unusual (and hard-won) command of cognate ideas, or of methods of reasoning-with-evidence. To summarize, we are able to see better because we look harder and because we have a body of knowledge that enables us to make better sense of what we see. (Liebling et al., 2017: 996)

Liebling et al. (2017) suggest that we should moderate that position. While accepting that academics can claim to see things with a certain sort of clarity because they possess a specific set of methodological skills as well as specific forms of knowledge that allow them to look at social phenomena in a particular way, *making sense of what we see* (and what to do about it) requires academics to work with others, and with their particular forms of knowledge. It follows that, rather than seeking *independence* (and, by implication, detachment) in knowledge production, we must acknowledge and confront the *interdependence* that research entails and requires.

Drawing on the metaphor of the ‘tower’ and the research ‘field’, they argue,

The tower is pristine, safe, and defended; it offers a privileged view of the landscape and its lofty construction implies esteem. The field is messy and dirty. Those in it lack both perspective and status. At the same time, it is impossible to see, hear, smell, taste, touch, and *feel* what is going on in the field from the tower. Perhaps most relevant to this chapter, the perspective that the tower allows might help us to see things differently – and to notice things that can’t easily be seen from within the field. But the opposite is also true: to try to reform the field without being in it would be foolhardy and probably dangerous, unless one’s intention is simply to fire projectiles from the tower to reshape the field. That would be ‘impact’ to be sure, but not of the sort we would seek or endorse. (Liebling et al., 2017: 997)

As Distant Voices has become more formalised and institutionalised as a research project, as it has become a much larger scale endeavour which involves many more partners and participants, the collaboration involved has also become much more complex. The terms of engagement and sites of engagement have changed in complex ways. Charting the challenges of negotiating and sustaining collaboration through this transition will require not just another paper, but also more time spent reflecting together with our collaborators about these challenges. What we have tried to do in this article is relate the pre-history of the current project, highlighting why and how the collaboration emerged and evolved as it did – essentially from a partnership rooted in a particular conjunction of interests to a multi-partner research project that is much larger, perhaps more ambitious in certain ways, and definitely more complex.

That said, we can draw one conclusion with some confidence. It is not easy to sustain the rewards of informal education (Freire, 2000) rooted in the aspirational principles of community learning and development (Ledwith and Campling, 2005) within a formalised research project – even one that has always aimed to be collaborative.

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Notes

1. Award no: ES/P002536/1.
2. Claire Lightowler and Lisa Pattoni were the co-conspirators.
3. This song, Breathe Life, went on to be recorded in the next phase of the project, and reached wide audiences through live performance and radio play. A few years later, a couple who were engaged to be married (previously unknown to us) got in touch to ask if we could perform it at their wedding!
4. UK Economic and Social Research Council (ref: ES/P002536/1).

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